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# Fallen Angels: On Reading Landscape and Poetry

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**The paper presents a case in point to illustrate the use of subject-related artistic manifestations as an effective pedagogical strategy to stimulate critical reading in non-native students of English literature. Focusing on literary representations of visual art and confronting students with different types of thematically related texts, a particular step by step procedure is suggested which enables students to appropriate a poem without the usual over-deference toward L2 in EFL learners. In the process, students are able to gradually assert their own reading of a poem with a new awareness of its textual, contextual and cross-textual connotations while gaining new insights into the nature of artistic discourse in general.**

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> I call upon you Old Masters in moments of deep despair
>
> Zbigniew Herbert

> *Pictoribus atque poetis quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas*
>
> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, v. 9–10

This paper will try to explore the possibilities of using various subject-related artistic manifestations as effective pedagogical materials in teaching English language and literature. It will present a case in point to illustrate how language and literary awareness in the broad context of courses on language and literature can be developed in this way, having as their ultimate aim to help students to take up an assertive — rather than submissive — position as critical readers. I have in mind our students in a Faculty of Humanities, with a syllabus that covers studies in art, philosophy and history besides literature. Although they have a fairly sophisticated literary background in Catalan and Spanish, as readers of English as a foreign language they share a general tendency which, I feel, is one of over-deference towards texts written in L2. In our teaching context it is, therefore, necessary to spot — and to challenge — ideological assumptions as well as propositional knowledge in the texts we examine. It should be, in any case, a common and general concern in education, for as Scholes (1985) has put it:

> In an age of manipulation when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts.

When addressing the question of critical reading with EFL students of English language and literature in a Faculty of Humanities, I find the approach suggested by a number of researchers in the last decade (Carter, Collie, Durant, Fabb,

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Fowler, Lazar, Long, MacRae, Maley, Pope, Short, Slater, Widdowson) to be especially relevant. Despite their different contributions to the field, they all share a concern in the use of stylistic analysis as a source for activities aimed not only at discriminating literary response but also at strengthening awareness of the potential and constraints of language used as literary discourse. It can be described as *pedagogical stylistics* and can, somehow, be grossly summarised by mentioning Carter's (1994) three basic 'principles': language-based; student-centred; process-oriented. There is, by now, a considerable amount of research and materials development which allows for a consistent pedagogical practice in our faculties — and especially for first-year students — devoted to bridging the gap between language and literature studies along these lines. A gap, indeed, which has inspired rather absurd organisational developments which have resulted in clear-cut divisions between literature and language departments. In the area of my concerns I find this state of affairs rather unsatisfactory,and based on entities which, as Wilde would put it, 'are divided by a common language'.

To take into account these three basic components (language/student/process) has certainly represented a reasonable step forward in strengthening links between language awareness and literary appreciation without losing sight of the inevitable shortcomings in the linguistic competence of EFL students. Yet, the fact that literary competence depends crucially on linguistic competence seems to be beyond doubt and it seems simply commonsensical to view both areas as complementary and, therefore, as explored more effectively when presented as part of a unified pedagogical concern. Critical reading, though, involves more than a critical response to the text itself. Wallace (1992) has rightly argued that critical reading:

… involves a critical awareness in a broader sense, of what reading itself is, which, in turn, involves a consideration of cross-cultural aspects regarding who reads what and why in what situations.

To stimulate that *critical awareness* the exploration of materials should follow a certain pattern in which *experiencing* and *responding* become consubstantial with *analysing* and which can be greatly reinforced by the teacher's intervention in informing the reading process (and, therefore, the construction of meaning) engaging students in the three 'movements and moments of intervention' which Pope (1995) has called *textual, contextual* and *cross-textual*.

Bearing all this in mind I will present a case in point to show how the assumptions mentioned so far can be especially developed when using a variety of subject-related materials which can be read and contrasted as artistic manifestations across cultures, historical periods and creative techniques. In addition, this kind of presentation involves, quite naturally, a reflection on issues concerning the creative process and the concept of intertextuality which opens up, for readers, the sort of perspectives they require to assert their own reading against the 'power' of the text. It is through this kind of practice that we can view our task — as facilitators of reader-response — as being just an operational strategy on the road to the ultimate educational goal of developing critical awareness in a broader sense. Let us now proceed to a step by step outline of what we do with a series of both visual and textual interrelated materials.

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## Development of Intertextual Awareness

### 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus'

We take as a springboard Pieter Bruegel's painting entitled 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' which has been dated c. 1558 (see Appendix 1) and is kept in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Students are shown the picture without mention of the title and we ask them to turn that landscape into a list of linguistic signs or expressions. We suggest an organisation into three small patterns eliciting groups of words expressing Things or Objects, Events or Happenings, and Circumstances.[1] For each pattern we can allow for linguistic variation and encourage expanded expressions which will result in nominal groups, verbal groups and adverbial groups or prepositional phrases depending on the word class each of them centres around. This process of familiarisation with the picture — which is also a reminder of how even our visual experience is structured by language into a diversity of sequences[2]— will focus, eventually, on the most salient feature on the painting: the two legs splashing in the water in an awkward upside-down position. Only then will we make connections between Bruegel's painting and the classical myth of the flight of Daedalus and Icarus as told by Ovid in Chapter VIII of The Metamorphoses.[3]

### An English version of the story

Having, thus, read the landscape as text, we will, then, examine an English version of the story in Ovid. It should be noted how *The Metamorphoses* has been called 'the artists' pagan Bible', having been so often a source of inspiration for artists. Once they have learnt about the story of the flight of Daedalus and young Icarus, students are asked to confront it with the painting. This time they should note what aspects and which characters from the story are left out or included in Bruegel's picture. Special attention will be paid to the more descriptive lines:

… Someone catching fish with his tremulous rod,/ the shepherd leaning on his crook, or the ploughman on his handle,/ saw them and wondered how they could take to the air/ and thought they must be gods.

A discussion about the indifference of these three representatives of basic productive activities (agriculture, animal herding and fishing) to the fall of Icarus will follow. The way the people around seem to go unconcernedly about their business can be stressed by pointing at the half-hidden head of a dead man very near the ploughman and a reference to a Flemish proverb: 'No plough is stopped for the sake of a dying man'. It is tempting to see Bruegel, as it were, wanting to get his message across with a hint to the culturally sophisticated through the presence of Icarus, but also to the common folks with a representation of a popular proverb. After all, Brueghel displayed his early mastery of Flemish folklore in a painting usually called *The Netherlands Proverbs* (1559).

### Auden's poem on the subject

We will now confront our perceptions about the painting with the well-known poem by Auden which makes a direct reference to Bruegel's work: *Musée des Beaux Arts* (see Appendix 2). Auden's poem is probably the best-known ekphrastic poem of the twentieth century, but *ekphrasis*, that is the literary

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representation of visual art, has been compiled with the corresponding illustrations by Abse and Abse (1986) and Adams (1986) and widely investigated with particular references to this poem by, to name a few, Weisstein (1978), W. Steiner (1982), Caws (1989) and Heffernan (1993).[4] The theoretical issue is, of course, an old one which can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetica* and, especially, to Horace's famous dictum in *Ars Poetica*,'*Ut pictura poesis*', which has stimulated permanent theoretical debate over the centuries.

Although the poem seems to make clear references to two other paintings,[5] we'll focus on Auden's description of the one he explicitly describes while trying to identify the items he concentrates upon and the ones he does not care to mention. I suggest a presentation of the poem with an initial discussion of the title to be followed, after a first reading of the whole poem, by a close look at the language of the first few lines and that of the stanza specifically devoted to the Icarus painting.

The opening discussion trying to predict the theme of a poem with the French heading 'Musée des Beaux Arts' will easily lead back to the previous discussion of the 16th century painting and the likely locations for such a Museum. But whatever expectations may arise about the subject of the poem, the first three sentences make it quite explicit and straightforward. The very first sentence beginning with the preposition 'about' in a salient position gives a clear clue (About suffering they were never wrong the Old Masters). The upturning of conventional word order for generic sentences of this type puts the thematic focus on 'suffering'. The concept is immediately qualified first, by the cohesive 'its' as 'human' in the second sentence (how well they understood its human position) and then by the deictic information supplied in what is appropriately the longest of the three (how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along). The sequence of disjunctives (while … or … or) is used here to emphasise the idea of common, daily routines. The theme of the poem is, therefore, clearly stated in these opening lines: suffering is an inherent feature of humanity but it makes nothing stop or, if you like it, indifference to individual suffering has always been a collective survival strategy in human society. The rest of the poem is only there to illustrate this basic point suggested, according to Auden, by 'the Old Masters'.

We could now turn to the last stanza with the specific description of the painting in question. Again, a close look at the way the language is being operated on will be revealing as to the author's intended effect. We can observe how the poet makes use of paradigmatic selection in order to 'translate' Brueghel's pictorial effects into linguistic signs. He is able to recreate the atmosphere of the painting through the vagueness of the language. This is due to a combination of a careful choice of strategically placed vague adverbials and sub-modifiers (*quite* leisurely/*something* amazing/*somewhere* to get to/*anyhow* in a corner/the sun shone *as it had to*/while *someone else* is eating or opening a window). Auden's subtle use of modals and tense throughout the poem reinforces the point, building stylistically, as it were, *indifference* into the text. Students should be helped to notice the fact that modals and tense are epistemic rather than purely deontic (there always *must* be/*must* run its course/*may* have heard the splash/as it *had to*) and how this adds elements of hypothesising, general speculation and

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a degree of assumed inevitability rather than active commitment, which are crucial to the intended narrative of the text.

Likewise, the general poetic organisation of the poem is seemingly casual and suggests linguistic indifference and nonchalance as if to mirror its own subject matter. Students should note, for example, the many unusual line breaks Auden introduces for no other obvious reason in the poem. They appear between adjective and noun (… white legs disappearing into the *green/water*), verb and object (… how well they *understood/its human position*; … that must have *seen/something* amazing), subject and verb (… and the torturer's *horse/scratches* its innocent behind), verb and another verb phrase (… the sun *shone/as it had to*), and modal an auxiliary (… the ploughman *may/have* heard the splash). We ask students to produce a different lay-out of the poem 'avoiding' these unusual line breaks. The exercise clearly illustrates that what is lost in this 'translation' is nothing but Auden's intended connection between language form and subject matter.

The overall effect of these stylistic strategies is, of course, to reinforce Auden's main point stated in the opening lines of the poem: the general lack of concern about an individual's tragedy (the white legs disappearing into the green water).

A final point about language can be made by making special reference to Icarus' 'forsaken cry'. The choice of 'forsaken' to qualify the 'cry' seems an obvious clue to Auden's linking of Ovid's pagan story to Christianity and the New Testament (Ovid's *infelix pater* calls to mind the Christian Daedalus to whom another dying son addresses the final words: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'(Mark 15:34)). This can open up new perspectives for interpretation and help our students to confront the 'fall' of this mythological figure with their more familiar set of Christian values and believes.

This interartistic examination of the poem could end by trying to identify any details in the poem which cannot be traced back to the painting. Auden's reference to 'the expensive delicate ship', for instance, is a rather surprising way of describing what is clearly a battleship in the painting. This will lead into a discussion of how the poet selects his materials which can be easily related to Wordsworth famous 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' and lead on to a general evaluation of the poem trying to elicit what Auden's work adds to our previous interpretation of the painting and, of course, to Bruegel's own intended meaning of his work.

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## The concept of human indifference to suffering

The concept of 'human indifference to other people's suffering' introduced by Auden in his particular reading of the painting can now be discussed in a new light if we focus on the date of the poem — 1938 — (are dates part of the poem?) and if we compare it to another text by another English author which was written the same year. We ask students to read the last paragraph of '*Homage to Catalonia*' by George Orwell (see Appendix 3), in which, on his return from the Spanish Civil War, Orwell observes the indifference of his fellow- citizens to human suffering elsewhere.[6] Students are asked to compare both texts and to consider them — with the benefit of hindsight — as describing a mood which was to be shaken very soon by the outbreak of the Second World War. Our reading of the

poem will now be inevitably informed by historical consciousness (a pertinent moment to discuss the way words and worlds merge on the page and in the classroom) and the identification of a cultural construct which is being manipulated through time, through different narrative techniques and according to changing historical perceptions.

## A comparison of Icarus poems

The next stage will consist of a comparison between Auden's poem with two later poems: 'Lines on Bruegel's Icarus' by Michael Hamburger, 1952 (see Appendix 4) and 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', published in 1962 by William Carlos Williams (see Appendix 5). Both poems have now to be seen as sharing the cultural experience of Bruegel's painting but carrying the inevitable resonance of Auden's poem, too. A close reading of the first stanza of Hamburger's poem uncovers analogical stylistic strategies with Auden's in creating an atmosphere of repetitiveness and mundane casualness. Auden's 'dogs go on with their doggy life' is clearly echoed in Hamburger's 'sheep … gaze into a sheepish present'. As a pedagogical way to establish these connections and familiarise students with the poem we suggest a predicting activity asking students to fill in a cloze version of the first stanza in which they have to choose from a list with all the simple present verbs related to the five subjects presented (the ploughman, the fisherman, the sailor, the sheep and the shepherd).

But it is in the second stanza that Hamburger's 'departs' from Auden's reading of the painting and adds another layer of interpretation or personal response to Brueghel's Icarus. This final stanza, which strongly suggests the image of the biblical 'fallen' angels, can be linked to the post-war mood of the early fifties and related to Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), a novel included in our students' first-year syllabus. The question of man's evil nature or his natural goodness is suggested through this new interpretation of the myth and opens up a debate which can be activated with references to Rousseau's and Hobbes' contrasting views on human nature, as these two authors are, also, discussed in their general Humanities curriculum.

We round off our itinerary by considering William Carlos Williams' reworking of the same subject, which we can now compare to the painting itself and the two previous poetic versions. The imagist undertones of W. Carlos Williams poem make it an interesting work to compare with a poem written by the Malaysian poet, Muhammad Haji Salleh, who in his 'a star-petalled flower falls' (see Appendix 6), deals basically with the same subject and suggests a similar conclusion. His poem, though, emerges from a very different cultural tradition and does not mention the story of Icarus. So, it feels as if we had gone the whole way from fallen angels giving significance to an apparently uneventful landscape to fallen petals providing landscape to set the tone for the significant last line in a poem (death is trivial).

In the W. Carlos Williams poem we observe a process of 'omission' in connection with the original painting. Only one character is kept (the farmer ploughing) and the focus of the poem is on a sound (the 'splash' in the last stanza) which, in an interesting reversal, finds a phonological correspondence to the visual effect of the legs disappearing into the water in Brueghel's painting.

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Although there is no mention of Icarus in the Haji Salleh poem, the Malaysian makes basically the same point. What is interesting to notice in the context of our dialogue between different artistic languages is how much the effect of both poems relies on visual presentation. The use of lower-case is foregrounded in both of them. Asking students to rewrite both poems, capitalising and adding conventional punctuation and inviting them to compare the different effects thus created, makes them aware of the visual and stylistic strategies used by both poets to convey their common subject-matter.

## Conclusion

It is my conviction that the use of subject-related elements from a variety of cultural, historical, literary and visual sources can develop artistic appreciation, provide students with relevant insights into the nature of literary discourse and sharpen their experience as critical readers. Moreover, the network of associations students are provided with equips them, as it were, with the tools that enable them to assert the text actively (to make it 'theirs') rather than to 'take it in' with the usual EFL learner over- deference. It seems to me that the case in point I have outlined in this article suggests the pedagogical potential of such an approach along these lines.

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## Notes

1. This procedure has been proposed by Butt *et al*. in *Living with English Book 1* working manuscript. School of English and Linguistics, Macquarie University, Australia.
2. José M[a] Valverde has recently put it in precise terms: '… Una imagen vale más que mil palabras, sí, pero sólo si previamente forma parte del ámbito lingüístico, porque, si no es así, no es una imagen. Sólo es imagen aquello que nombramos, quisiéramos nombrar o nos preguntamos cómo nombrar … Si reconocemos (algo) como imagen es gracias al contexto lingüístico, que implica unas estructuras. Estructuras lingüísticas, sí, y también códigos históricos …'. In *Imatge i Religió*. M. Corredor (ed.) (1995) El sagrat en l'art. Barcelona: editorial Cruïlla.
3. Other references to the use of Icarus in world literature can be found, for instance, in the entry 'Daedalus' in P. Brunel (ed.) (1992) *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*. London: Routledge.
4. Although not concerned with EFL teaching, see Michael Benton (1992) Secondary Worlds: Literature Teaching and the Visual Arts. London: Oxford University Press. Benton makes interesting points on reader-response theory in teaching literature and suggestions for classroom practice in this connection.
5. Two other paintings by Bruegel — *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566) and *The Slaughter of the Innocents* (1564) have been identified as fitting, somewhat, Auden's description in the first stanza of the poem.
6 A relevant reference from the same period could be mentioned to reinforce Orwell's point. In Esmond Romilly's *Boadilla* (1937), thinking of his friends killed in the defence of Madrid, the author writes: 'There is something frightening, something shocking, about the way the world does not stop because these men are dead'. Another possible link connected with the Spanish Civil War could be the idea of 'geological indifference' explored by André Malraux watching the battlefields from the plane in *L'Espoir* (1937).

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## Appendix 1: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,* Pieter Bruegel, c. 1558

## Appendix 2: *Musée des Beaux Arts*

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

W.H. Auden, 1938

## Appendix 3: *Homage to Catalonia*

And then England — southern England, probably the sleekest landscape in the world. It is difficult when you pass that way, especially when you are peacefully recovering from sea-sickness with the plush cushions of a boat-train carriage under your bum, to believe that anything is really happening anywhere. Earthquakes in Japan, famines in China, revolutions in Mexico? Don't worry, the milk will be on the doorstep tomorrow morning, the *New Statesman* will come out on Friday. The industrial towns were far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth's surface. Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen — all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.

George Orwell, 1938

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## Appendix 4: *Lines on Brueghel's Icarus*

The plowman plows, the fisherman dreams of fish:
Aloft, the sailor through a world of ropes
Guides tangled meditations, feverish
With memories of girls forsaken, hopes
Of brief reunions, new discoveries,
Past rum consumed, rum promised, rum potential.
Sheep crop the grass, lift up their heads and gaze
Into a sheepish present: the essential,
Illimitable juiciness of things,
Greens, yellows, browns are what they see.
Churlish and slow, the shepherd, hearing wings —
perhaps an eagle's — gapes uncertainly.

Too late. The worst had happened: lost to man
The angel, Icarus, for ever failed,
Fallen with melted wings when, near the sun
He scorned the ordering planet, which prevailed
And, jeering, now slinks off, to rise once more.
But he — his damaged purpose drags him down —
Too far from his half-brothers on the shore,
Hardly conceivable, is left to drown.

Michael Hamburger, 1952

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## Appendix 5: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was plowing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wing's wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

William Carlos Williams, 1962

## Appendix 6: *a star-petalled flower falls*

now when the small hours
grow big with the day
when darkness keeps its perspective
and the mist of the evening rain waits
over bushes and streams
a small star-petalled flower falls,
propelling its single flight
through the dawn-thick air
folding softly on damp earth,
its whiteness caught
in the late window light.
death is trivial.

Muhammad Haji Salleh, 1978

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